

# UConn-Providence OT thriller proved that the Big East still has its fastball

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PROVIDENCE, RI— The Big East has peaked on two separate occasions as a conference since its inception in 1979. The first peak would be the 1985 Final Four, which included three Big East teams (Georgetown, Villanova, and St. John's). The title game that year also included two Big East teams, with the Cinderella eighth seed Villanova taking down Patrick Ewing and Georgetown.

The second peak would be the 2011 NCAA tournament, in which the conference sent a then-record 11 teams dancing. One of those teams, UConn, ended up winning the national championship.

What followed those two peaks was a debilitating realignment cycle in 2013, when several original members cut ties with the rest of the football-playing schools. The conference took those seven catholic institutions, added three more, and began business as the “new” Big East.

Ever since then, the Big East has been good— not great, not fantastic, but good. There have been four national titles, but they have come from just the two dominant schools of the league (UConn and Villanova). The conference has definitely been lapped by the larger power conferences that are double the size. Particularly this year, the Big East’s basketball prowess came severely into question throughout the first nine weeks of the season.

Last night’s game between UConn and Providence showed the nation that Big East basketball is alive, well, and as exciting as ever.

UConn, ranked third in the SM 25 Hard currently, came into the game against their regional rival with a 14-1 record. Their only blemish came at home against Arizona, and that was with their star big man Tarris Reed Jr. sidelined due to an ankle injury. Providence came into the game with an 8-6 record. Despite being voted fourth in the Big East Preseason poll, the Friars have underperformed so far.

This game was a perfect encapsulation on why all of that nonsense can be thrown out the window once the ball is tipped. For starters, Amica Mutual Pavilion was *loud*. They are a usually incredible fan base, but their hatred for both UConn the school and Dan Hurley the coach (perhaps Dan Hurley the man) combined for a true cocktail of chaos.

Providence played this game off the back of that crowd and some insane shotmaking. They went 14-24 from beyond the arc— that's 58%, for my math wizards. They hit exactly half of their field goals, and went on a run towards the end of the first half that included a spirited sequence to cap off the first 20 with a ten point lead. A Jason Edwards three, an Oswin Erhunmwunse layup, and a Corey Floyd Jr. three all in the span of almost two minutes blew the lid off the place. The Friars went into the locker room up 37-27, and it seemed tonight might be a night that they just don't miss.

That trend continued to loom true. The Huskies were able to bounce back a little in the second half, especially after Dan Hurley was somehow issued a technical foul at halftime (you gotta give him credit at some point, right?). The Friars kept their distance. If UConn came back with a few points, Providence was always able to keep them at arm's length with another mini-run of their own. As a UConn fan, it was a frustrating watch. For Providence fans, my hypothesis is that this was a fantastic watch— until the end, that is.

The story for UConn was Silas Demary Jr. (23 pts, 15 ast, 7-11 FG) and Braylon Mullins (24 pts, 8-14 FG, 6-10 3PT), who led the Huskies in the second half with Alex Karaban (23 pts, 5-9 3PT) contributing some major threes down the stretch.

That was all in response to the stellar performances of freshman Jahmir Jones (18 pts, 3-4 3PT) and Corey Floyd Jr. (12 pts, 2-3 3PT). Off the bench, Stefan Vaaks (11 pts, 4 rebs) and Ryan Mela (19 pts, 5-9 FG) gave the Friars more depth to extend their lead whenever UConn came storming back. Providence led by five with under a minute remaining. It felt out of reach for the Huskies.

That was until Alex Karaban hit a huge three to cut the deficit, and later it was his three that Tarris Reed Jr. rebounded to put back and tie the game with 13 seconds left. After a missed baseline jumper by Corey Floyd Jr. (former UConn Husky, by the way), Silas Demary Jr.'s near halfcourt winner did not fall. Overtime at the AMP.

The Huskies ended up taking control in the extra period, with Demary dealing the fatal blow. His mid range jumper put UConn up five with about ten seconds left, effectively sealing the comeback win.

This game had essentially everything the Big East would promote as positives. Raucous home crowd? Yes. Incredible play-by-play for TV viewers? Check. (Seriously, John Fanta put in his *Thriller* on this one—all hits, and even the non-hits were pretty good. Props to the man.) Back and forth, physical gameplay? You know it. Coaches beefing? Not really, but Hurley did get a tech! That counts as a half point.

Elite shotmaking, of course, is the final ingredient that stirs the drink. People were down on the Big East this year, and rightfully so. The Big Ten and Big 12 have soared past them, and even the SEC broke the Big East's record of teams in the tournament last season when they sent 14 schools. However, this game proved that the product is still there. The energy and drive is still there. The passion looms large.

Don't count out the Big East yet. They seem down, but give them a ten count. Last night was an indication of what knockout punches we may see in the coming months.